Customer Focus

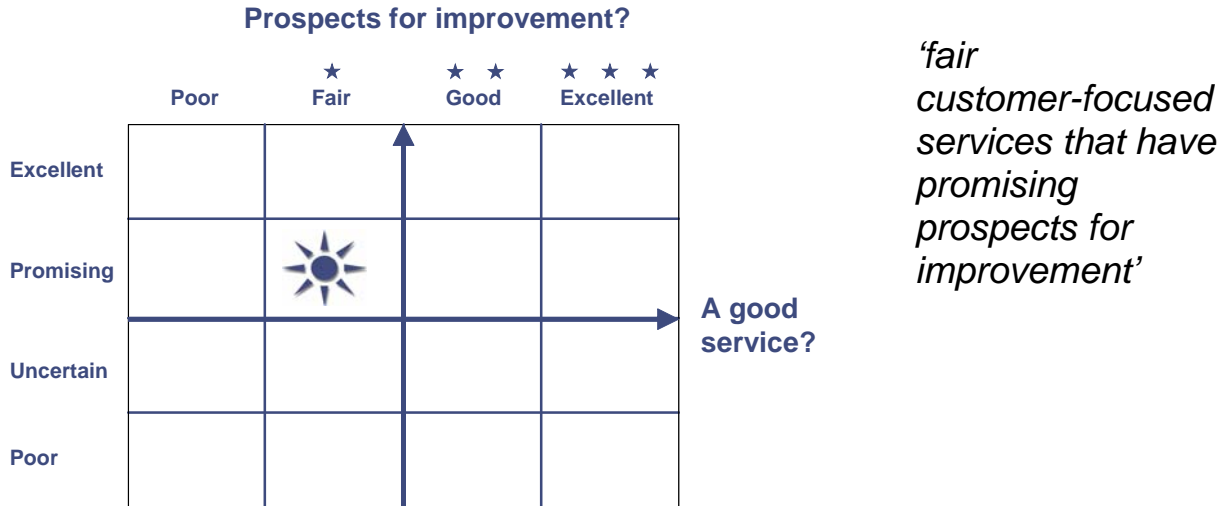## North Wiltshire District Council

Contents

Summary

1 North Wiltshire District Council provides **fair** customer-focused services that have **promising** prospects for further improvement.

2 We have assessed the Council as providing 'fair', one-star customer-focused services. Overall satisfaction with the Council is below average and among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils when levels of deprivation are considered. Customer access is difficult for some local people. One in four local people who had visited the main Council office had found it difficult. Car parking can be difficult for customers, opening hours are not customer-focused and the percentage of council buildings suitable for and accessible to disabled people is among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils, based on national performance indicators. In addition, the Council has made poor progress in promoting race equality and implementing the equality standard for local government. The Council does not have a clear view on how its costs and the quality of services compare with other councils and has not developed clear targets for value for money from the customer focus priority.

3 However, strengths include the Council's long-standing focus on improving customer service that is embedded in many of the Council's corporate strategies and service planning processes. The Council's main council office, which deals with the vast majority of interactions with the public is fully accessible, family friendly and welcoming and is 'fronted' by a customer contact team who are able to deal with in excess of 90 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact. Customers can easily contact the Council by telephone and there are high levels of satisfaction with some services.

4 We have assessed the Council as having promising prospects for improvement. The Council has a good record of delivering improvements in customer service. It is self-aware and open to learning and uses customer feedback, the recommendations from service reviews and inspections effectively to improve services for local people. The Council has established a major change programme, the *'Improving Access to Services and Information Programme'*, to deliver customer-focused improvements. There is good managerial leadership of the programme and the Council has invested in its approach to project management. There has also been investment in improvement areas such as equalities, community planning, procurement and performance management.

5 The new Leader of the Council is providing new impetus to the Council's corporate priorities of customer focus and equalities. The Council has prioritised significant additional funding to support the customer focus priority, including substantial investment in information technology to support new ways of working and has the financial capacity to introduce additional external specialist capacity.

6 However, the Council has not yet defined a clear vision and developed a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority. There are also weaknesses in the Council's 'set-up' of the programme and the capacity of some key individuals is limited because of other work pressures. The Council has not yet secured the commitment of staff to help drive improvement and there have been limited opportunities for involvement from the wider councillor body. In addition, the Council and its partners are not yet maximising the potential for joint working to provide a more customer-focused service that meets the needs and expectations of local people for a more joined up and seamless service across the county.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed the Council as providing a 'fair', one-star customer-focused services that have promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart[1]   North Wiltshire District Council – Customer Focus

Prospects for improvement?

	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★ ★	Excellent ★ ★ ★
Excellent				
Promising		☀		
Uncertain				
Poor				

A good service?

'fair customer-focused services that have promising prospects for improvement'

8 The Council provides 'fair' one-star customer-focused services because of the following.

◆ The Council has not yet defined a clear vision and developed a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority.

◆ The Council has not yet adopted corporate service standards. This means that customers and partner organisations have no standard against which they can judge the quality of services they receive.

◆ Customer access is difficult for some local people. One in four local people who had visited the main Council office had found this was the case. Car parking can be problematic, opening hours are not customer-focused and not all Council buildings are suitable for and accessible to disabled people.

◆ The Council has made poor progress in promoting race equality and implementing the Equality Standard for local government. The Council has failed to set out its commitment to service equality and put in place systems to ensure that it understands the needs/requirements of the entire community.

◆ The Council has not developed an integrated and targeted pricing policy across all services that recognise the need to balance income and address social inclusion.

◆ Satisfaction with the way the Council is running the area is below average and among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils when levels of deprivation are considered. Satisfaction with some services is below average or among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils, for example, housing benefits.

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[1] The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

◆ The Council does not have a clear view on how its costs and the quality of services compare with other councils and has not developed clear targets for value for money from the customer focus priority.

9 However, there are areas of strength, including the following.

◆ The Council has had a long-standing focus on improving customer focus that is reflected in the Council's long-term vision for itself by 2020.

◆ Providing customer-focused services is embedded in many of the Council's corporate strategies and through the Council's service planning processes.

◆ There are clear links between the Council's customer focus priority and national agendas.

◆ The Council's corporate ambitions to provide customer-focused services have been a strong 'driver' in a number of significant corporate decisions that have substantially improved the quality of customer service. For example, the decision to build new offices fronted by a customer contact team.

◆ The customer contact team are able to deal with in excess of 90 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact in a fully accessible, family friendly and welcoming environment at the main council offices at Monkton Park.

◆ Customers can easily contact the Council by telephone particularly using the general council number which is dealt with by call centre staff who can deal with approximately 25 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact.

◆ There are high levels of satisfaction with the Council's sport and leisure facilities and above average satisfaction among planning applicants.

10 We have concluded the Council has 'promising prospects for improvement' because of the following.

◆ The Council has a strong track record, over a number of years, of delivering improvements in customer service including good progress in meeting the government's targets for implementing electronic government and improvements in the delivery of customer services.

◆ The Council has a successful track record of addressing poor performing services for example, the transformation of the planning service which has been identified as one of the most improved nationally.

◆ The Council has a high level of self-awareness, about strengths and weaknesses, in its approach to the customer focus priority and the areas it needs to address in its improvement plans. The Council demonstrates openness to learning from its own experience, other councils and from customer feedback to help improve the design and delivery of its services.

◆ The performance management framework ensures the corporate priority of 'customer-focus' is integrated and features strongly in the corporate plan and business plans and is cascaded effectively into team and individual work plans.

◆ The new Leader is providing new impetus to the Council's corporate priorities of customer focus and equalities.

◆ The Council has strengthened its approach to project management by adopting a corporate project management methodology to deliver customer-focused improvements. In addition, there is good managerial leadership of the programme.

◆ The Council is investing in important 'building-blocks' and improvement areas such as work on equality and diversity, community planning, service planning, procurement and performance management.

◆ The Council is building capacity to deliver improvements in customer-focus, for example, through its staff development programme and by partnership working via the countywide Customer First Partnership.

◆ The Council has prioritised significant additional funding to support its customer focus priority and has the financial capacity to use external consultants to introduce additional specialist capacity.

11 However, there are important issues that the Council will need to address in order to deliver this improvement.

◆ The Council has not yet defined a clear vision and developed a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority.

◆ The Council has made poor progress on equalities and failed to meet the October 2004 deadline for compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act.

◆ Until recently, the Council has failed to address significant and long-standing internal weaknesses in the waste service.

◆ There are weaknesses in the Council's 'set-up' of the programme including clearly identifying the drivers for change, business case, efficiency gains and success criteria by which the programme will be measured.

◆ Performance management arrangements to support the programme remain untested and there have been limited opportunities for involvement in the programme from the wider councillor body.

◆ Work pressures are affecting the ability of some key staff to contribute fully to key strands of the programme.

◆ The Council has not yet secured the commitment of staff to help drive improvement and the behaviour of some customer facing staff is not consistent with the customer-focused and equality-focused culture the Council is trying to achieve.

◆ The Council and its partners are not yet maximising the potential for joint working to provide a more customer-focused service that meets the needs and expectations of local people for a more joined up and seamless service across the county.

Recommendations

12 The Council is recommended to:

◆ define a long-term vision and develop a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority, which includes consideration of how customers can access information and services that;

- ◆ reflects the needs and aspirations of customers, all sections of the local community, and other stakeholders; and

- ◆ informs the key corporate plans and strategies of the Council and its partners;

◆ improve access to Council services by;

- ◆ ensuring that all information about Council services is clear, uses plain language and is widely available in appropriate alternative formats;

- ◆ developing a robust understanding of the needs/requirements of all sections of the local community through effective monitoring systems and engaging with under-represented groups;

- ◆ considering the need for and benefits of adopting more customer-focused opening hours and examine ways in which access to car parking could be improved;

- ◆ implementing plans to improve disabled access;

- ◆ developing an integrated and targeted pricing policy across all services that effectively balances the need to maximise income while also promoting social inclusion;

- ◆ taking positive steps to embed equality and diversity and a customer-focused culture across the Council for example, through its approach to training, performance management and policy making;

◆ improve Council services to customers by;

- ◆ ensuring consultees are given feedback on how their views were taken into account in policy and decision-making;

- ◆ undertaking specific consultation with local people as part of the development of corporate service standards and in identifying options from the change programme;

- ◆ working with partners to provide a more joined up and seamless service across the county.

- support change in the Council by;
    - developing a robust and fully resourced project plan which identifies the drivers for change, business case, efficiency gains and success criteria by which the programme will be measured;
    - ensuring that there are clear policies procedures and training in place to support and develop staff leading the business process mapping work; and
    - developing a bespoke communication plan linked to the project plan to ensure the effective internal communication of the vision and benefits of the programme to key groups such as councillors and middle managers.

13 We would like to thank the staff of North Wiltshire District Council , particularly Nick Fenwick, Jackie Todd and Jackie Tavener, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously. We would also like to thank the users, partners and staff who took the time to speak with us and attend our focus group meetings.

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Report

Context

14 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission (the Commission) following an inspection under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

15 The North Wiltshire district is a large rural area (officially classified as 81 per cent rural) with a dispersed population in six market towns and over 50 villages. It covers an area of 768 square kilometres, of which 25 per cent falls within the Cotswolds and North Wessex Downs areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB). The six market towns and their populations are Chippenham (33,030), Calne (13,030), Wootton Bassett (11,120), Corsham (10,970), Malmesbury (5,420) and Cricklade (4,240).

16 The 2001 census shows that the resident population of North Wiltshire was 125,372 and is now estimated at over 126,000. Between 1991 and 2001, the population of the district increased by 10.9 per cent (12,372 people), much higher than the national average increase of 2.6 per cent. The population is projected to reach 141,000 by 2021 - an increase of 10.8 per cent since 2003.

17 The proportions of young people, people of working age and people of pensionable age are close to the national averages. The proportion of people from ethnic groups other than 'white British' is 4.1 per cent. This compares with 4.6 per cent for the south west, and 13.0 per cent for England. In July 2004, there were 26 travellers caravans in the district, all of which were on authorised sites (traveller data source: ODPM).

18 North Wiltshire is among the least deprived districts in England, ranked 307th out of 354 English councils in terms of the ODPM's indices of deprivation, where one is the most deprived. Despite this, two wards are among the 25 per cent most deprived nationally, and there is hidden poverty in rural areas. Employment is mostly within the service sector – in public services, the retail sector and tourism. New industries are being established on sites in Chippenham, Calne, and Wootton Bassett. Unemployment is low at 1.7 per cent, but earnings are below the national average. House prices are high in relation to local average earnings and the affordability of housing is a key issue.

19 All these factors - population growth, new housing developments, low unemployment, pockets of deprivation, and cultural diversity - result in a complex mix of needs and wants. These are all fundamental factors that the Council must understand and proactively respond to in delivering its services. These local characteristics are also particularly critical in determining how local people access and make contact with the Council now and in the future.

The Council

20 The Council comprises 53 councillors and has a complex political environment where 26 councillors are Liberal Democrats, 25 are Conservative with one Labour and one independent. No party has overall control. The current leader of the Council was elected in May 2005 and is from the Liberal Democrats.

21 The Council's executive comprises the leader and nine other councillors known as lead members. Each lead member is responsible for specific services and functions. The executive is made up, principally, from the Liberal Democrats with one Labour councillor. There is one overview and scrutiny committee with a finance and performance monitoring subcommittee.

22 The Council's corporate plan 2005/06, which was approved in April 2005, highlights six cultural ambitions that all services focus on:

◆ customer needs;

◆ community engagement;

◆ partnership working;

◆ performance management;

◆ strong effective leadership; and

◆ valuing people.

23 Within the Council's overall mission statement of 'Improving North Wiltshire', there are four corporate aims setting out the approach taken to all its work:

◆ to create a customer service culture by investing in and empowering those who serve the public;

◆ to ensure high quality, cost effective services;

◆ to enable the provision of responsive, accessible and fair services delivered with courtesy and care; and

◆ to safeguard and enhance the assets and resources of North Wiltshire and the wider community.

24 A new corporate management board (CMB) was formed in January 2004, which is made up of the Chief Executive and four strategic managers. CMB collectively shares responsibility for the management and leadership of the Council, the management of its performance, and delivery of its priorities and services.

25 The Council has four business areas. Within these, 325 full-time staff equivalents are employed to develop and run services in the district. The business areas are:

◆ community and environment;

◆ corporate services;

◆ customer services; and

◆ planning services.

26 The Council's revenue expenditure in 2004/2005 was £15,775 million. Capital expenditure was £3.6 million. Projections for the current year are in line with budgets.

Customer focus – context

27 Customer focus is about refocusing services around the needs of all sections of the community. An accessible and user-focused organisation places the customer at the heart of the service delivery, it knows what local people want and has organised itself to deliver this. Developing a more user-focused approach is not just a regulatory obligation. It is also part of good management and providing high-quality services.

28 Access to local information and services remains a key issue for local government. Local people often find access to Council services difficult and confusing. Local people are not clear about how to access the right service in councils particularly in areas where there are two tiers of local government. Local people are demanding easier access and more access outside traditional core hours. The government also see customer access as important and have identified seven key tests of the success of the local government of the future in service delivery.[2] Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, the national e-government strategy and the recently published ODPM priority outcomes that local authorities are expected to achieve by December 2005.

29 All councils have a duty to provide services to customers, stakeholders, partners and clients. In focusing on the needs of the whole community, councils should ensure that their services provide equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. Services should be easy to access and supported by technology, where this is appropriate, to meet customer's needs. In assuring good access to services, councils should be responding to customer feedback and complaints to improve service quality and access to services. Councils should also be using partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to continually improve access to services. Customer access is cross-cutting theme applicable to all council services.

30 This inspection is part of a programme of work in Wiltshire that covers all five councils. It arises out of improvement planning following comprehensive performance assessments of the councils. This process identified a number of issues which were common to the councils to varying degrees and each of the councils has identified customer focus as one of its priorities for improvement. Fundamental to these is how councils are implementing a user-focused approach to service delivery and improvement.

31 North Wiltshire District Council completed a self-assessment of its customer focus in April 2005 to help guide and inform this inspection.

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[2] Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services; White Paper – joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

32 The Council has had a long-standing focus on improving customer-focus. The Council's four corporate aims identified in the corporate business plan 2004/05 were agreed in 2001 and are to:

◆ create a customer service culture by investing in and empowering those who serve the public;

◆ ensure high quality, cost effective services;

◆ enable the provision of responsive, accessible and fair services delivered with courtesy and care; and

◆ safeguard and enhance the assets and resources of North Wiltshire and the wider community.

33 The Council is aiming to achieve customer-focused services. The Council has made responding to customer needs and community engagement key parts of the organisation's cultural ambitions. In addition, providing customer-focused services is also central to the Council's long-term vision for itself in 2020. The long-term vision includes customer-focused ambitions such as to provide 'the Council in your living room'; to provide easily accessed services for the whole community; and to ensure that people of all ages have a strong voice.

34 The Council's corporate ambitions to provide customer-focused services have been a strong 'driver' in a number of significant decisions the Council has taken corporately. For example, the Council decided to reduce the number of offices it had and build one fully accessible office, fronted by a customer contact team able to deal with a wide range of customer service requests. Furthermore, the Council agreed to the joint procurement of a new customer relationship management system as part of the Customer First Partnership made up of the five Wiltshire councils, because it recognised the potential benefits to customers in the
longer-term of a common approach across the county, despite already having a system that was 'fit for purpose'.

35 There are clear links between the Council's customer focus priority and national agendas. For example, the government's success measures for service delivery in local government and the national e-government agenda. In addition, the Council recognises the potential of the introduction of a customer relationship management system (CRM) to support the national efficiency agenda. The customer focus priority is also consistent with the plans and priorities of key local partners for example, the Customer First Partnership and the local strategic partnership's (LSP) emerging community strategy.

36 Providing customer-focused services is embedded in many of the Council's corporate strategies and integrated into the Council's service planning processes. The Council's approach to service planning supports the corporate aim to improve customer focus. For example, the Council's planning services business plan 2004/07 sets a clear and ambitious objective *'to ensure that all our customers are aware, understand, and can access all relevant information on our services by March 2007, to achieve a customer satisfaction level of 80 per cent'.* This is supported by specific actions in the detailed work programme many of which focus on improving the customer experience for example, by running training sessions with agents and improving the planning website.

37 The Council has not yet adopted corporate service standards, nor are there service standards for customers in place for all services. In addition, there are no standards identified that councillors should meet in responding to local people. This means that customers and partner organisations have no standard against which they can judge the quality of services they receive. This can cause inconsistencies in the level of service provided by individual services and difficulties in managing customer expectation.

38 The Council has not yet defined a clear vision and strategy for delivering the customer focus priority. For example, there is no access strategy to guide the future development of customer contact channels. In addition, the Council does not yet have a clear understanding of the needs and aspirations of all sections of the community and is not making effective use of the systems it already has in place strategically to influence its future plans. For example, using customer contact information to improve its understanding of who in the local community is using its services and who is not, for example, among demographic groups or minority communities.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

How easy is it to access services?

39 The Council provides high quality face-to-face services to customers from one office situated at Monkton Park in Chippenham. The Council has arranged its services so that its customer contact team, who are responsible for both the reception and the Council's call centre, are able to deal with range of Council services where there is a high volume of customer contact. Reception staff deal with general enquiries and service enquiries such as revenues and benefits, planning and homelessness. At present, reception staff deal with in excess of 90 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact. The call centre staff also deal with general enquiries, council tax and business rates, benefits and pest control enquiries. At present call centre staff deal with approximately 25 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact.

40 Access to council offices can be difficult for some local people, in particular those using a car. The Council's own survey in 2004 identified that approximately one in four local people who had visited the main council office had found it difficult. The principle reason cited was difficulties in parking. While parking available at the main council office is in line with the national planning policy it is often very difficult to park at the main council office. There are pay and display car parks within walking distance, but these are often very busy. Local people we spoke to were also concerned about the Council's approach to charging for car parking.

41 The Council demonstrates an awareness of the impact that fees and charges can make in promoting social inclusion within services. However, the Council has not developed an integrated and targeted pricing policy across all services that recognises the need to balance income and address social inclusion. Positively, the Council reviews its approach to fees and charges annually and there are clear links to the medium-term financial strategy. Councillors receive information on how the Council compares to other local councils and, where appropriate, the private sector but do not have access to market research information. Furthermore, the Council does not undertake a strategic review of all fees and charges levied to consider how they could be balanced to support local priorities. This means that the Council may be missing opportunities to maximise income by setting charges below what local people are willing and able to pay or may not be maximising the impact of concessionary charges.

42 Historically, the Council has provided services such as pest control to local people who receive means tested benefits free of charge. However, this year the Council has introduced a charge of £10 for pest control treatments for people on means tested benefits. It is unclear how the Council meaningfully reviews the success of its charging structures and how it will monitor and review the impact of this decision. In addition, the Council's approach to charging people of pensionable age is inconsistent and confusing.

43 Some people, either because of where they live, or because of the Council's opening hours, cannot easily access Council services. This is particularly important for some vulnerable customers such as older people who value personal contact. The Council recognises this and has designated officers who can visit customers who are unable to access Council offices. However, local people we spoke to felt strongly that the Council should be doing more with the county council and parish councils to ensure that they are able to access all Council services more easily. Local people we spoke to also felt that the Council should consider more flexible customer-focused opening times, for example, Saturday mornings in addition to the 'traditional' office hours when the Council is currently open (Monday to Thursday 9.00am to 5.00pm and Fridays 9.00am to 4.30pm). The Council's own surveys of users, however, showed that in 2004/05 approximately 90 per cent of current users were satisfied with opening times.

44 The Council funds five area offices located in the main towns of Malmesbury, Corsham, Wootton Bassett, Calne and Cricklade where customers can access the Council's intranet and find common forms. This was confirmed by our reality checks. However, staff in the area offices, although helpful and courteous, were not able to answer simple enquiries about district Council services. In addition, local people we spoke to were not aware that district Council services could be accessed through these area offices.

45 The Council failed to meet the October 2004 deadline for compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. In 2003/04, the percentage of Council buildings suitable for and accessible to disabled people was 40 per cent. This is below average for councils nationally and there has been no improvement in the last year. However, the main Council office at Monkton Park, which deals with the vast majority of face-to-face enquiries from the public, is fully accessible to disabled people. In addition, the Council has carried out surveys of all its buildings in October 2004 and has prepared plans for their improvement. Further, the Council plans to transfer services that are provided through the Council's depot to the main Council office. This is in recognition of not only access for disabled people, but also safe access a range of customers such as parents with children. The Council is also looking at the future options for the other two Council buildings that failed to comply with DDA requirements, but has made some adjustments to help provide equality of access for disabled customers.

46 The customer contact team, who are responsible for both the reception and the Council's call centre, provide a highly quality customer-focused service which is recognised by both staff and local people. Staff are well trained and are easily identified with clear corporate branding. The reception area at the main Council offices at Monkton Park is family friendly and welcoming and is equipped with a range of aids and adaptation to meet the needs of a range of customers for example, disabled people.

47 The customer contact team is delivering a highly responsive service to local people who visit the Council's offices to make an enquiry in person. Waiting times are effectively managed, with 83 per cent of customers seen within 15 minutes in 2004/05. Performance on local performance indicators show around

98 per cent of customers are satisfied by the overall quality of service provided and 54 per cent feel the service is continuing to improve.

48 The majority of customers access Council services by telephone. Customers we spoke to and our own reality checks found that it was generally easy to contact the Council by telephone particularly using the general Council number which received by call centre staff. The service is responsive to customers' needs and we found that staff were helpful, professional and delivered a timely and high quality service. Positively, the Council has made some improvements to customers' telephone to the council tax and housing benefit service by extending the times that customers can contact the service by 15 minutes at the start and end of each day. However, staff, customers and our own reality checks identified an over-reliance in some departments on the use an answer phone and some examples of calls not being returned.

49 One significant issue that is currently adversely affecting the Council's performance in responding to customers is the performance of its housing benefit service. The Council recently replaced an out of date computer system that had been contributing to poor performance in the time taken to process claims. Inevitably, the move to a new computer system has caused a backlog in processing benefit cases. This has led to high volumes of service requests to the customer contact team. These issues have contributed to levels of customer satisfaction with the benefits service among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils including satisfaction with benefits staff, the telephone service and contact/access facilities.

50 There are systems in place to ensure the health and safety of 'lone workers'. However, staff have expressed concern that these are not rigorously followed. There are also procedures for sharing information on potentially violent persons across the organisation. Again, staff have expressed concerns about how these procedures operate. In addition, the Council does not have systems in place to share information held by services on specific customer needs across the organisation.

51 Local people we spoke to are unsure of the range of services available and the standards of service they can expect to receive from the Council. The Council does not have published service standards and even residents who have lived in the area some time and are interested in local services, such as those on the people's voice panel, were unaware of some services, or of how to contact their local councillor.

52 Information about the Council's out-of-hours service is not easily accessible or well publicised. Customers we spoke to told us that they were unclear as to what services were available. Because of this lack of clarity, they would probably call the police to deal with problems that the Council has responsibility for such as noise nuisance. When a customer calls the Council out-of-hours, they are directed to an answer phone where they are given information on a range of options. Our reality checks found that information was not consistently clear, for example, on what is and is not considered an *'environmental emergency'*.

53 The Council is failing to deliver what it promised in relation to its own targets for promoting race equality and implementing the Equality Standard for local government. Equalities and diversity is one of the Council's key priorities. However, progress with the duty to promote race checklist score did not meet the Council's own low target in 2003/04 and remains among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. In addition, the Council did not achieve level 1 on the equality standard for local government in 2003/04. This means that the Council failed to set out its commitment to service equality and put in place systems to ensure that it understands the needs/requirements of the entire community, for example, through monitoring within service departments and targeted consultation. The Council has not set itself targets and objectives for improving equality outcomes for local people. The corporate plan 2005/ 06 includes several actions carried forward from the previous year. These include achieving level 1 on the equality standard by March 2006 and updating the race equality scheme.

54 The Council is not meeting its own targets for satisfaction with the way the Council is running the area and with individual services. Overall satisfaction with the Council has fallen from 61 per cent in 2000/01 to 54 per cent in 2003/04. While this decrease is broadly in line with the national trend, public satisfaction with the Council is below average and it puts the Council among the worst performing
25 per cent of councils nationally when levels of deprivation are considered. In addition, satisfaction in some service areas is below average or among the worst performing 25 per cent of councils for example on household waste collection (when levels of deprivation are considered) and housing benefits where public satisfaction is falling. However, there are high levels of satisfaction with the Council's sport and leisure facilities which are currently run for the Council by an independent trust and strong performance in determining all planning applications (among the best 25 per cent of councils) and above average satisfaction among planning applicants.

Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?

55 The Council has invested in its website to develop 'self-service' options for customers allowing them to resolve queries at a time that suits them with little or no direct contact with staff. These are the most cost effective way of communicating, consulting and transacting with local people and are important in the light of legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act.

56 The Council has invested in improvements in its ICT and is making good progress in terms of meeting the government's expectations for the electronic delivery of all services during 2005/06. By the end of March 2004, the Council had achieved
65 per cent of its target, with full or more than 80 per cent electronic enablement of certain types of interactions, including provision of information, collecting revenues, booking venues resources and courses, and access to community professional and business networks. Currently the Council is on target to have 88 per cent of its services available electronically by the end of March 2005 and 100 per cent by the end of December 2005.

57 The Council's website provides a range of useful features for members of the public. The site includes an A-Z of services in line with the national best practice and is easy to navigate around. There is up to date service information, council and community news and on-line services and meets accessibility standards. The site now meets WCAG AA accessibility standards[3] and the Council is beginning to use the website for consulting with local people for example, as part of the development of the housing strategy.

58 The Council publicises its website on all letters and the Council's newspaper, 'improving North Wiltshire'. However, council staff and particularly those in the customer contact team are not being proactive in promoting the use of the website to encourage more people to use the 'self-service' options that the website provides.

How is the service communicating with local people and how is it using customers' feedback to improve service quality?

59 The Council has some effective communication tools that are valued by local people, for example, 'Improving North Wiltshire' is sent to all residents – which is good practice – twice a year. In addition, local people we spoke to told us that the Council's performance booklet, that is included with council tax bills, was both helpful and informative.

60 However, the Council's overall approach to communication is an area for improvement. Positively, the Council has recently adopted a new communication and consultation strategy. The corporate management board (CMB) are responsible for leading the strategy and managers are responsible for ensuring that staff are aware of the strategy and act upon it. However, the Council's strategic approach to communication is not informed by a robust understanding of the needs/requirements of 'segments' of the local community, for example, older people. In addition, the Council's strategy does not include clear targets for improvement such as improving the percentage of local people who feel informed by the Council. Furthermore, we found that staff were unclear as to who was responsible for communication in the Council and managers have not had training on their responsibilities.

61 A number of mechanisms exist to improve external communication. For example, communication is a competency for all staff assessed through staff appraisals. In addition, the Council has introduced corporate branding and style guide /web guide for staff. The Council also has a principle of 'write once – publish anywhere' which means that all information should be written using plain English to allow it to be used in any media from press to website.

62 However, the Council has not ensured that key customer facing staff have training in the use of plain English and while protocols for web-based information are strong the protocols to ensure that information produced by individual service departments meets the standard of corporately produced information need to be strengthened. Corporate documents demonstrate brand consistency, were generally well structured and written in clear simple language. However, information about obtaining the document in alternative formats was not included on all corporate documents.

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[3] AA accessibility standard is a way of measuring the accessibility of web pages to people with disabilities through for example, not only making the language clear and simple, but also providing understandable mechanisms for navigating within and between web pages.

63 Internal communication is effective. Senior managers and councillors recognise the need to communicate effectively with staff and use the 'intranet', team meetings and the internal staff newsletter and staff seminars to good effect. The Council also recognises the need for ongoing communication with the trade unions as part of change management processes.

64 The Council's new communication and consultation strategy sets out key principles for consulting with local people. Positively, these include issues such as linking together consultation exercises where possible and providing feedback to consultees. This should help address concerns raised by members of 'people's voice' that we spoke to who felt that they were not told how their views were taken into account in policy and decision-making. However, ensuring consultation addresses, equalities and diversity issues is not identified as a key principle despite being one of the Council's key priorities. Although one of the aims identified in the strategy is to improve consultation with hard to reach groups and the aims identified are not SMART (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and timetabled).

65 The Council has both good and improving links with the local media. The communication and consultation strategy has a robust approach to media with clear protocols identifying responsibilities and procedures. Positively, the Council is investing in improvements in its relationship with the local media through weekly meetings between the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive and the local press.

66 The Council uses both the people's voice – comprising a representative cross-section of residents – and tomorrow's voice, a specific young persons' consultation channel – for consultation. The Council is improving its understanding of the needs and aspirations of young people in a number of ways for example, through the young people's council held three times a year and through a young people's conference held in October 2004 and attended by over 100 young people. Local communities are also engaged through five area committees. The Council has also adopted the Wiltshire COMPACT, a 'code of practice' on consulting with the community and voluntary sector.

67 There are some weaknesses in the Council's approach to consultation. The Council has not yet developed arrangements for ongoing engagement with under-represented groups, such as minority communities, for example, through user reference groups. Furthermore, the Council is not following good consultation practice by providing feedback. For example, to the 'people's voice' on how their views were taken into account in policy and decision-making. The Council is not monitoring consultation responses to ensure that they match the demographic profile of the district. This failure means that the Council does not identify any imbalance in the contextual information given to councillors and senior managers to help inform their decisions.

68 The Audit Commission's district council comprehensive performance assessment identified that the Council has good mechanisms for obtaining suggestions for service improvement from users and other stakeholders. The Council has recently revised its comments and complaints policy and has a comments and complaints database for the management and sharing of responses to comments and complaints. The Council also uses customer feedback cards, weekly customer satisfaction surveys and a customer comments box.

69 Satisfaction with the handling of complaints is around the average for all councils, with 33 per cent satisfaction in 2003/04. However, we found an inconsistent understanding in services about what constitutes a complaint. This means that the Council may be missing opportunities to learn from complaints and those customers could receive an inconsistent service.

70 In addition, the Council does not currently have systems in place to ensure that it has a complete overview of all complaints received through various channels. The Council does not systematically identify and use information on different levels of satisfaction or complaints among different groups within the local community for example, customers from minority communities. The Council's new comments and complaints policy '*Driving Quality Improvement by Effective Comments and Complaints Management'* includes a clearer guidance on what constitutes a complaint and identifies the need to record demographic information as part of the process.

How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?

71 The Council, along with the county council and other districts, are investing time and effort to develop further their partnership approach to customer focus by creating a joint committee with pooled resources to maximise opportunities to coordinate ICT strategies, share learning and expertise and implement a joint programme of work to improve the customer experience. Key successes include the procurement by the partnership of the same customer relationship management (CRM) system.

72 The Council has demonstrated a strong commitment to partnership working by agreeing to the joint procurement of the customer relationship management system. The Council recognised the benefits that this will give to local people in the longer term despite already having a customer relationship management system that was 'fit for purpose'. The Council is also actively exploring opportunities to attract external resources through the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership (WIP) made up of all five local councils which has bid for monies to support work on 'street scene' activities.

73 The Council has made some progress in ensuring that local town councils have access to basic information. However, the potential for town councils to improve customer access by providing information and assistance with queries on services provided by other local authorities is not being fully exploited. Positively, the Council has supported local parish councils through the 'parishes online' project. Positive outcomes include financial support for the purchase of equipment and software and website development and training to nineteen parish councils. The project has also allowed the sharing of good practice and information about services available electronically.

74 There are weaknesses in customer access to leisure facilities, which are currently run for the Council by an independent trust. These include poor access for disabled customers, access to services via a website and providing information available in a range of languages and formats.

Is the service delivering value for money?

75 The Council has detailed procurement policies and procedures that provide a clear framework for procurement activities. These cover the whole life cycle of procurement and encompass national strategies, the Council's own standing orders, financial regulations, and staff code of conduct. The Council is also using joint procurement as a way of improving customer access and increasing value for money, for example, the procurement of a customer relationship management system and website software. As stated earlier the decision to enter into the joint procurement of the customer relationship management system was driven by the potential longer-term benefits that the system offers to local people. For example, improved value for money, through joint provision of services with the other Wiltshire councils.

76 In addition, the decision to build fully accessible new offices fronted by a customer contact team able to deal with a wide range of customer service requests in 2001 created 'cashable' efficiency gains to the Council of £385,000, which the Council has reinvested into services. Furthermore, the introduction of home working for some staff in housing benefits has led to increases in both productivity and performance in processing times.

77 The Council knows the cost of running its customer contact team but it does not have a clear view on how its costs and the quality of services compare with other councils providing similar levels and standards of service currently and over time. In addition, the Council has not developed clear targets for value for money from the customer focus priority.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

78 The Council has a strong track record over a number of years of delivering improvements in customer service. For example, the overall quality of customer service improved significantly following the move to a new fully accessible office at Monkton Park and the setting up a dedicated customer contact team able to deal with a wide range of customer service requests in December 2001.

79 The Council continues to enhance the quality of service and experience that customers receive. Local performance indicators for the customer contact team show that in the past year 54 per cent of customers feel the service has improved. Over 90 per cent of enquiries are now dealt with at first point of contact with the percentage of customers, including those with planning enquires, waiting more than 15 minutes falling from 23 per cent in April 2004 to less than 7 per cent in April 2005. However, the Council has been slow to improve some areas affecting customers' access to and experience of its services such as providing services at more customer-focused times and better access in rural areas.

80 However, customer satisfaction levels have fallen considerably with key services affecting vulnerable groups such as housing benefit. There has been a national trend of lower levels of satisfaction with councils over the last few years. However, overall satisfaction with the Council has fallen more that the national trend between 2000/01 and 2003/04. Satisfaction with the handling of complaints has fallen broadly in line with the national trend.

81 The Council has a successful track record of addressing poor performing services. The transformation of planning performance was achieved through a fundamental change programme addressing all facets of service performance including a strong focus on organisational culture and improving customer focus and this learning is now being shared in some other service areas. The planning service was poor, but is now recognised by ODPM as one of the most improved nationally. One aspect of this improvement is reflected in the strong performance in determining planning applications. In 2003/04, the Council improved its speed of processing for all three categories of application, meeting government targets for major, minor and other applications, with performance comparable to best 25 per cent nationally. As a result, 75 per cent of major applications are now decided within 13 weeks compared to only 42 per cent in 2002/03. The Council can also demonstrate improvements based on national performance indicators for 2002/03 in other services that are benefiting local people, such as community safety and environmental indicators such as recycling, although in the case of the latter, from a low baseline.

82 Good progress is being made in meeting the government's expectations for the electronic delivery of all services. By March 2004, the Council had achieved 65 per cent of its implementing electronic government (IEG) target with full or more than 80 per cent electronic enablement of certain types of interactions, including outcomes that will benefit customers such as providing up to date service information, collecting revenues, booking venues resources and courses. It has continued to make good progress in the last year, with its own figures for BVPI 157 showing that 88 per cent of its services electronically available by March 2005 and the Council is on target to achieve 100 per cent by December 2005.

83 The Council has also recently redesigned its website, which now meets WCAG AA accessibility standards. These improvements are reflected in increased use of the Council's website. In the past year, since April 2004, the number of people using the website has increased from 7,860 to 9,130 per month with the number total volume of use increasing by 27 per cent. The Council has also purchased two mobile self-service kiosks that it will be 'trialling' at various locations across the district. At a service level, the Council has also recently replaced an out of date computer system that had been contributing to poor performance in the housing benefits service. This system was introduced by the Council in a period of only
nine months. This was significantly faster than the supplier forecast.

84 The Council responds positively to recommendations from best value reviews and inspection reports and uses these as a basis to improve its services for local people. The Council has systematically reviewed the findings of the district comprehensive performance report published in July 2004 and the resulting improvement plan is fully integrated within its best value performance plan 2005/06. Examples of customer-facing improvements so far include progress with community planning and in developing a draft district-wide community strategy' a youth conference held in October 2004 to understand the needs and expectations of young people and agreeing a strategy and action plan to improve physical access to Council buildings. Similarly, the Council is seeking to improve the benefits service in response to the findings of its overview and scrutiny task group established in September 2004 and recent BFI inspection. The introduction of the new computer system will underpin improved performance in speed and accuracy of processing benefits claims.

85 The Council is using customer feedback to improve the design and delivery of its services. Positive outcomes for local people include the introduction of an appointment system for housing benefits and Council tax enquiries, online booking of building control inspections, improvements in the way the Council communicates planning decisions and customer-focused improvements to its reception area such as specialist disabled seating. All of which are helping to improve the customers' experience of the services they receive from the Council.

86 Importantly, the Council has made poor progress on equalities. For example, progress with the duty to promote race checklist score did not meet the Council's own low target in 2003/04. In addition, the Council did not achieve level 1 on the equality standard for local government in 2003/04. Furthermore, the Council failed to meet the October 2004 deadline for compliance with Disability Discrimination Act and there has been no improvement in the last year. The Council recognises this is an area of weakness and has recently established a new strategic working group with cross-cutting responsibility to deliver its corporate priorities for equalities and diversity and has allocated additional capital funding in 2005 to 2007 to improve physical access to its buildings.

87 Until recently, the Council has failed to address significant and long-standing internal weaknesses in the waste service. For example, a weak approach to performance management, health and safety and issues affecting organisational culture. As a result, the service has failed to maintain a sustained focus on the needs of customers. The Council has made significant progress in improving health and safety and is now addressing other weaknesses through a best value review of cleansing and amenity services which is being implemented in parallel with service developments designed to extend the availability of kerbside recycling across the district. This will cover 95 per cent of homes by September 2005 and substantially increase the rate of recycling from what has historically been a very low base.

How well does the service manage performance?

88 The Council has a high level of self-awareness about strengths and weaknesses in its approach to the customer focus priority and the areas it needs to address in its improvement plans. This is an important starting point from which to define and develop its plans.

89 There are well-developed plans in the short-term to build on the success and expand the role of the customer contact team. For example, the Council plans to integrate the separate administrative team based at the depot dealing with public enquiries for environmental and amenity services, including waste collection, with the customer contact team. This is due to happen in July 2005. The integration of this team will benefit customers by widening the range of services provided on a one-stop basis and ensuring they benefit from the consistently high standards of customer service that the dedicated customer contact team delivers.

90   There are, however, weaknesses in the Council's improvement plans. The Council has not yet defined a clear vision and developed strategy for delivering the customer focus priority. The absence of a clear vision and strategy means that staff and councillors are unclear as to the scope of the programme beyond that relating to the delivery of ODPM priority outcomes for implementing e-government. This is an important limitation.

91 In April 2004, the Council established the *'Improving Access to Services and Information Programme 2005 to 2007',* to deliver customer-focused improvements over the medium-term to March 2007. The programme is arranged into nine themed projects each led by a dedicated project manager reporting to the programme board[4]. Lead councillors are aware of the change programme through briefings at the e-government group. This is a cross-party working group, which is chaired by the executive member with responsibility for customer focus and
e-government and is responsible for overseeing progress in meeting IEG requirements.

92 Positively, the Council has strengthened its approach to project management by adopting Prince2 as the corporate project management methodology. The project initiation document (PID) written as part of the 'set-up' of the *'Improving Access to Services and Information Programme'* identifies clearly governance, performance and risk management arrangements. In addition, it recognises the

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4 The Improving Access to Services and Information programme is a generic title given to the various initiatives to improve the Council 's customer focus – major projects include; re-designing customer facing business processes; implementation of customer relationship management (CRM) software; and improving the Council 's website

need for effective communication and the need to involve a number of 'internal consultants' to bring their professional expertise to the programme.

93 However, there are weaknesses in the Council's 'set-up' of the programme. *'The Improving Access to Services and Information Programme 2005 to 2007'* PID fails to identify the drivers for change or the improvements in quality associated with the investment in terms of benefits to the Council or to local people. It does not provide a robust business case that identifies the key success criteria and efficiency savings by which the overarching programme could be measured. The individual projects do not all have clear specifications and as such their cost and the resources necessary to deliver them have not yet been fully identified. Consequently, the Council has not yet developed detailed work breakdown plans that identify resources and timescales for delivering the programme strands or developed supporting plans such as an internal communication plan. The Council recognises these issues and is currently in the process of developing and testing the business cases for each of the project strands prior to consideration of the projects and overall programme by the programme board and corporate management board (CMB) respectively in July 2005.

94 Performance management arrangements to support the programme remain untested. However, current plans for reporting on progress need to be strengthened to ensure that all councillors and senior managers have a clear view of the benefits, progress and impact of not delivering the priority. In particular, the role of the councillor e-government board, which has until now focused more narrowly on the requirements of IEG needs to be expanded and aligned more closely to that of the wider change programme encompassed by the *'Improving Access to Services and Information Programme 2005 to 2007'*. There have been limited opportunities for involvement in the programme from the wider councillor body to date. The Council needs to ensure that performance reporting to councillors on progress is robust to ensure that all councillors have a clear view of the benefits and the likely impact of not delivering the programme for example, through meaningful involvement of overview and scrutiny in the programme.

95 The Council continues to develop its overall performance management framework. It has implemented a hierarchy of corporate and service plans that provides for the effective cascade of corporate priorities, articulated in its *'Corporate Business Plan 2005/06'* into the business plans of the four business areas and in turn into team and individual work plans. Effective management of the framework ensures the corporate priority of 'customer focus' features strongly both in the corporate plan and in the work programmes of the four business areas. This means that a focus on customers is integral to corporate, service and individual work programmes. However, the Council does not have a fully effective and strategic approach to target setting to measure its achievement in meeting its corporate objective of customer focus. For example, many of its future targets for public satisfaction in customer-facing services are set for incremental improvement. To drive improvement the Council will need to set challenging targets to match the best 25 per cent of all councils nationally.

96   Mechanisms for performance monitoring continue be refined and improved by the Council and regular performance monitoring is now taking place at all levels of the organisation. Progress with targets included in the corporate plan is monitored on a monthly basis by CMB and lead councillors, with formal reports on a quarterly basis to the executive and the overview and scrutiny committee. The CMB also receives monthly performance reports from each of the four business areas, which are then reported to lead councillors and cascaded to staff through team leaders and team meetings. The monthly business area reports are used corporately to monitor progress in agreeing individual work plans and carrying out the staff appraisals, which underpin the performance management framework. However, the performance management framework is not fully effective in supporting the Council's ambitions and priorities as customer and equalities-focused competencies do not form part of the key core competencies assessed through the appraisal scheme.

97   The Council learns from other councils and from its own experience. It actively seeks out good practice and uses this to improve its own services. The district comprehensive performance assessment identified that the Council's approach to developing the call centre and its business planning processes reflected learning identified from other councils. Good practice in customer service and performance management is also being shared internally for example, learning transferred from planning to environmental health services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

98   There is a new impetus on the customer focus priority and equalities coming from the new Leader of the Council. This has reinforced the importance of the customer focus priority to the Council and gives confidence that the change programme will be delivered. Importantly in a complex political environment the Leader is taking positive steps to manage the Council's political affairs for example regular meetings with the opposition which are helping to embed a cross-party approach to establishing and meeting local priorities such as customer-focus.

99   The Council has strengthened the corporate leadership of customer focus by taking the positive step of identifying a member of the Executive and of CMB to act as lead councillor and lead officer respectively for customer focus. This cross-cutting role incorporates responsibility for customer focus and IEG, together with liaison with the county-wide Customer First Partnership. In addition, the strategic manager with responsibility for customer services also acts as the programme sponsor for the Improving Access to Services and Information Programme 2005 to 2007, on behalf of CMB. Positively, the project board, which has overall responsibility for delivery of the programme, includes three of the four strategic managers who together with the Chief Executive form the Council's CMB.

100 However, councillors and senior managers have not yet worked together to define a clear vision and develop a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority which has been shared with staff, stakeholders and customers. This means that the Council is not currently working collectively towards a common purpose.

101 Capacity to deliver the corporate change programme is supported by the Council's approach to individual work plans. This ensures that all staff allocate on average 3 per cent of their time to corporate work. In this way, the Council has already identified staff to undertake business process mapping. Positively, the Council has identified the development of internal capacity as a key outcome from the programme. To this end, the Council has introduced a development programme to support staff in their project roles. The Council is training staff on project management methodology and has also employed external consultants to deliver training on undertaking business process mapping using a nationally recognised model. However, it is too early to say whether the staff chosen to lead this process have the right skills and the Council has robust mechanisms to support and develop these key staff.

102 The managers leading the customer focus priority are capable individuals. The programme sponsor is respected by staff and senior managers. The Council also has dedicated managers responsible for the delivery of customer services who have the skills and experience to help drive improvement. Project managers are committed and are developing their knowledge and experience of formal project management methodology.

103 In addition, at present other work pressures are limiting the ability of some key staff to contribute fully to key strands of the *'Improving Access to Services and Information Programme'*. In addition, the Council has not developed detailed work breakdown plans that identify resources and timescales for delivering the programme strands. This is important to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to support the changes particularly for key project managers and services such as HR.

104 As part of its wider development programme, the Council is seeking to use staff training to support its corporate priority of customer focus. The Council has aligned its corporate training programme to its priority objectives and is prioritising expenditure accordingly. The training budget for 2005/06 identifies customer care, equalities, change management and project management as key areas for investment. The Council is also using its induction programme for new staff to promote its focus on diversity, customer contact and e-government. However, the Council should ensure that all staff and councillors have training on the Council's corporate priorities particularly customer focus and equality and diversity.

105 The 'customer focus' culture is strong in the customer contact team and is being supported through dedicated management and training and development. However, the behaviour of some customer facing staff is not consistent with the customer-focused and equality-focused culture the Council is trying to achieve. This could seriously affect the Council's reputation and ability to provide customer-focused services if not actively addressed.

106 The Council is investing in important 'building-blocks' to increase its capacity to deliver improvement. For example, it has set up a corporate working group to take forward its work on equality and diversity; continued to develop community planning resulting in the publication of local area plans and drafting of a district-wide community strategy; improved its service planning and performance management arrangements. The Council has also invested in both its project management and procurement arrangements and improved its approach to comments and complaints. In addition, the Council's human resource department is doing some positive work around recruitment and retention and in reviewing staff induction and appraisal procedures.

107 The Council has invested appropriately in e-government to support access to services and promote 'self-service' options for customers, which allows customers to resolve queries with little or no direct contact with staff for example, through the internet and the mobile self-service kiosks. In addition, the new customer relationship management system will allow the Council to improve customer service and identify and address barriers to accessing services among different groups within the local community. The system will allow the Council to address weaknesses in its approach to dealing with complaints for example, by identifying and analysing differences in satisfaction among some groups. The Council has also made progress to support home working.

108 The Council has prioritised significant additional funding to support its customer focus priority. The Council's financial plan identifies future investment to improve physical access to Council buildings and compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act of £345,000 in 2005/06 and a further £230,000 in 2006/07. In the same period, the Council plans additional capital investment in e-government of £940,000.

109 The Council has made effective use of external consultants in the past, to provide additional specialist capacity, and has the financial capacity to do so again. It recognises that it may be necessary to bring in additional external expertise to assist with specific aspects of the customer-focus. The Council also has experience of successfully adopting different approaches to change management, ranging from incremental change over the medium-term to large scale change within relatively constrained timescales. It is evident that there is a high degree of confidence among middle managers that once the Council has made the key strategic choices around the programme then the Council will be able to deliver it effectively.

110 The Council has good industrial relations. The Council's HR department is currently working with the trade unions to develop a change strategy. However, the Council has not yet secured the commitment of staff to help drive improvement. Middle managers are unclear as to the Council's future plans and some view potential changes such as the expansion of the call centre and providing more assistance to customers through reception staff as potentially adversely affecting the quality of customer experience.

111 The Council is using partnerships to improve customer service, for example, through the Customer First Partnership. The Council is also exploring opportunities to attract external resources to support the customer focus priority for example, the Council as part of the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership (WIP) has submitted a bid to the ODPM's capacity-building fund to support work on improving customer service. In addition, the Council has made a successful bid to the regional centre of excellence to support 'street scene' work.

112 The Council has demonstrated a strong commitment to partnership working to improve customer service. The Council agreed to the joint procurement of a new customer relationship management system through the Customer First Partnership because it recognised its benefits to customers in the longer-term despite already having a customer relationship management system that was 'fit for purpose'. The Council's plans for customer contact broadly align with those of the Customer First Partnership and senior managers are committed to the principle of providing contact points in key locations and to providing a seamless service with the county council. However, the Council is not maximising partnership working. The Council and its partners are not yet maximising the potential for joint working to provide a more customer-focused service that meets the needs and expectations of local people for a more joined up and seamless service across the county.

Appendices

The purpose of a best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that the Council provided for us. These included:

◆ service description and self-assessment;

◆ corporate business plan 2004/05 and draft business plan 2005/06;

◆ service plans;

◆ communication and consultation strategy;

◆ comments and complaints procedure;

◆ implementing electronic government return;

◆ procurement strategy; and

◆ project initiation documents.

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above in order to get a full picture of how good the Council is at providing customer-focused services. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

◆ observations of service delivery;

◆ 'mystery shopping' exercises;

◆ use of the website;

◆ testing systems including telephone answering; and

◆ reviewing leaflets and other publicity material produced by the service.

List of people interviewed

Julie Arthurs	ICT Development Officer
Peter Barnett	ICT Team Leader
Laurie Bell	Strategic Manager (Community and Environment)
Jo Cogswell	Community Partnership Team Leader
Nigel Daniels	Building Control Team Leader
Alun Davies	Strategic Manager (Planning)
Gwyn De'Arth	Regeneration and Asset Management Team Leader
Mike Doran	Environmental Health Team Leader
Councillor David Evans	Lead Member for Customer Focus and E-government
Nick Fenwick	Strategic Manager (Customer Services)
Sally Frances	Customer Focus Team Leader (Planning)
Wendy Gubbins	Corporate Administration and Member Support Team Leader
Julie Higinbotham	Benefits Team Leader
Peter Hill	Anti-social Behaviour Co-ordinator
Di Hodges	Finance Team Leader
Paul Langcaster	Press and Media Officer
Debbie Lardner	Human Resources
David Lovelock	ICT Strategy and E-government Officer
Katarina Luce	Community Development and Youth Project Officer
Sian Lynch	Senior Customer Services Officer
Bob Marshall	Chief Executive
Carole Northam	Communications Officer
Councillor Carol O'Gorman	Leader of the Council
Elaine Orchard	Human Resources and Payroll Team Leader

Rose Outen	Research Officer
Sue Pangbourne	Strategic Manager (Corporate Services)
Charles Pescod	Development Control Team Leader
Mel Scott	Waste Management Strategy Officer
Jax Tavener	Team Leader – Customer Contact
Jackie Todd	Senior Customer Services Officer
John Watling	Policy and Democratic Services Team Leader
Graeme Wilson	Customer and Business Support Team Leader
Focus Group	Frontline staff
Focus Group	Customer Services Team

Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available[5]. Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;

◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);

◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and

◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;

◆ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;

◆ enable the government to see how well its policies are working in practice;

◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and

◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

[5] This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.